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SUBJECT: ELIAS MURR CLAIMS LAHOUD PREPARED TO APPOINT ISSAM
FARES AS HEAD OF PARALLEL CABINET

Classified By: Jeffrey Feltman, Ambassador, per 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (S) In a 4/23 meeting with the Ambassador, Deputy Prime Minister and Defense Minister Elias Murr added his voice to the rumors that Lebanese President Emile Lahoud plans to appoint a competing cabinet to reinforce the position that the Siniora cabinet is null and void. In Murr's version (which he attributed to information from his father, Aoun bloc MP Michel Murr), Lahoud's final act of office on November 24 will be a "back-to-the-future" moment: like Amin Gemayel in 1988, Lahoud will take advantage of the (presumed) lack of presidential succession to appoint a PM who would serve as caretaker head of state (competing with the Siniora cabinet, which would continue to enjoy international legitimacy). As Lebanon's head of state is always a Christian, Lahoud approached two Maronites -- MP Michel Aoun and army commander Michel Sleiman -- to pitch his idea. When both refused, Lahoud then won the acquiescence of former Deputy PM Issam Fares, who would return from his self-imposed exile in Monaco to head a six-person cabinet that would stay in office until legislative elections, as late as 2009. The presidential vacancy would only be filled after new legislative elections eliminate the March 14 majority. Murr thought the only way to avoid this scenario would be to come up with a compromise presidential candidate before November.

¶2. (S) Separately, Hariri advisor Ghattas Khoury reported a similar story (albeit without the link to Issam Fares). According to Khoury, Michel Aoun made a secret trip to Damascus last week, traveling by night in Hizballah cars, where Syrian President Bashar al-Asad tried but failed to get him to agree to serve again (as he did so disastrously in 1988-1990) as PM and caretaker chief of state. Khoury said that Lahoud is also considering Sunni candidates for PM, with both Omar Karami and Salim Hoss interested and Najib Mikati rejecting the idea. Surprising for a March 14 stalwart, Khoury, too, saw the need to start thinking about compromise presidential candidates. Khoury argued that, once the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is established, it is less important for March 14 to have full control over the presidency, since Syria's influence will be weakened by the tribunal. He said that Saudi Arabia has already begun quiet talks with Syria regarding Lebanon's presidency. End summary.

LAHOUD TO USE PRESIDENTIAL VACUUM
TO APPOINT PM, ACTING HEAD OF STATE

¶3. (S) Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr told the

Ambassador that his father, Metn political boss and Aoun bloc MP Michel Murr, had reported to him in detail a plan that the younger Murr found plausible. Syria and its Lebanese allies would use either legal (i.e., the two-thirds' quorum argument) or even physical means to block presidential elections in the autumn. Following the example set by Amin Gemayel in 1988, Emile Lahoud would then end his presidential mandate on November 24 by appointing an interim Prime Minister who would serve as caretaker head of state until presidential elections took place. Syria's Lebanese allies will prevent presidential elections until after the next legislative elections, in the belief that new elections will eliminate the March 14 majority. Syria and its allies are willing to wait even until 2009 (the constitutional period for the next legislative elections) if needed, Murr quoted his father as saying. While the cabinet of PM Fouad Siniora would exist in parallel and have the recognition of the international community, the pro-Syrians assume that they would exercise sufficient power that Siniora and his ministers would be isolated, marginalized, and progressively weakened.

AOUN, SLEIMAN REBUFF LAHOUD'S COURTSHIP

¶4. (S) As Lebanon's head of state is always a Christian, Lahoud would -- again like Gemayel in 1988 -- appoint a Christian as caretaker PM. Lahoud already pitched Michel Aoun on the idea. Saying he wanted the presidency or nothing, Aoun said that he had no interest in reprising his role as PM with a parallel cabinet across town. Lahoud's second choice was Lebanese Armed Forces Commander Michel Sleiman (who, like Aoun and Lahoud, is a Maronite). Sleiman, according to Murr, also demurred, saying that he did not want

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to split the army nor go against the international credibility of the Siniora cabinet that had led to such enormous increases in assistance and responsibilities for the LAF.

BUT ISSAM FARES REPORTEDLY INTERESTED

¶5. (S) Contacting a former friend who relocated from Lebanon to his Monaco-berthed yacht when the Syrian army withdrew from Lebanon in spring 2005, Lahoud got his third choice, former Deputy PM Issam Fares (Greek Orthodox, like the Murrs), to agree to his dubious proposition. Fares will in the coming months return to Lebanon from his self-imposed exile to prepare for his autumn appointment, Murr insisted. His cabinet-to-be will consist of only six ministers total, with the Ministry of Justice going to Lahoud's legal advisor Salim Jeressaiti (who has developed Lahoud's legal arguments against the Special Tribunal for Lebanon). Lahoud still hopes Sleiman will come on board as Minister of Defense (and the cabinet's one Maronite representative), but Murr was doubtful.

¶6. (S) The Ambassador asked what would be in such a questionable deal for the multimillionaire Fares, who has business and philanthropic interests (including sizable donations to two U.S. presidential libraries) around the world. Striving to appear more than a Lebanese pro-Syrian has-been politician, Fares has worked hard to project an international reputation as a statesman, including by endowing a center and a lecture series at Tufts University. Would he really wish to become an international pariah through such a scheme? Jabbing out his third cigarette, Murr said that we should not underestimate the appeal of being prime minister, especially for a Greek Orthodox Lebanese who normally could not aspire to higher office than Deputy Prime Minister. Murr said that he believed his father would know, via the elder Murr's friendship with Lahoud and his Greek Orthodox kinship with Fares, whether Fares would accept Lahoud's proposal. "He will," Murr said categorically.

COMPROMISE PRESIDENCY WOULD BLOCK LAHOUD

17. (S) Murr said that one way to derail such a plan would be to ensure that presidential elections take place as scheduled in the autumn: if there is a presidential successor, Lahoud will have no constitutional arguments allowing him to appoint an interim PM and caretaker head of state. (Given Taif amendments, Lahoud's constitutional prerogatives are considerably weaker than Amin Gemayel's were in 1988 in any case.) That, however, would require talking to the Syrians or their allies seriously about the presidential succession. The Ambassador asked Murr for his views regarding whether Syria's Lebanese allies were willing for a genuine compromise presidential candidate. Murr acknowledged that they would likely seek to portray as a compromise someone whom they in fact controlled. But if it comes down to a choice between a genuine compromise candidate and a vacuum in the presidency, Syria's Lebanese allies may prefer the vacuum but will find public opinion against them. (Murr and the Ambassador did not discuss names of who might be a genuine compromise.)

DID BASHAR AL-ASAD PITCH MICHEL AOUN
ON THE SAME IDEA, IN DAMASCUS LAST WEEK?

18. (S) On April 24, former MP Ghattas Khoury, a close advisor to MP Saad Hariri, told the Ambassador a scenario that was quite similar to Murr's report. Khoury said that he had heard from contacts "in the presidential guards" close to Lahoud that Lahoud had approached both Aoun and Sleiman regarding an interim premiership. Frustrated by their refusal, Lahoud then arranged a secret trip by Michel Aoun to Damascus "last week," where Aoun met with Syrian President Bashar al-Asad. Aoun, who traveled to Damascus in Hizballah vehicles and across an informal passage between Lebanon and Syria at night, used the basic argument of "been there, done that" to resist Asad's request that he accept the premiership. Aoun boasted to Asad that he could control Lebanon through his alliance with Hizballah and his Christian support, and thus he deserved the presidency.

19. (S) With his preferred Christian candidates refusing his offer, Lahoud is now considering appointing a Sunni premier

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instead, Khoury said. Focusing on former PMs, Lahoud approached Najib Mikati, "who ran the other way." Both Salim Hoss and Omar Karami are intrigued, according to Khoury's source in the presidential guards. The Ambassador noted that it would be odd for Hoss in particular to accept such an offer, since Hoss was -- like Siniora today -- the internationally recognized PM when Aoun claimed to be PM. Khoury shrugged. Khoury noted that if Lahoud called for formal consultations, according to Lebanon's constitution, regarding a new PM, the March 14 deputies would be in a real bind: if they participated in the consultations, they would be signaling acceptance of the argument that the Siniora cabinet is not legitimate. But if they refuse, then the MPs of Hizballah, Aoun, and Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri will claim that the competitive PM has been legitimately chosen without opposition.

WITH A TRIBUNAL ESTABLISHED, THE IMPORTANCE
OF THE PRESIDENCY DIMINISHES SOMEWHAT

110. (S) Khoury, who has been one of the consistently strong voices within the March 14 bloc, confided that, at some point soon, March 14 leaders need to start talking seriously about a genuine compromise presidential candidate. For now, he said, the push for a March 14 presidency should continue. But in fact, if the choice is between a compromise president and a presidential vacancy that allows Lahoud to appoint a

parallel PM, "we should find the compromise candidate." Khoury argued that, once the Special Tribunal for Lebanon is established, the character of the president becomes somewhat less important. Now, March 14 needs to control the presidency in order to press an agenda that includes the tribunal and freedom from Syrian domination. Once the tribunal is established, Syria will be weaker and on the defensive, meaning that Lebanon's president does not need the same strength he would today. Even UNSCR 1559 and 1701 issues, including Hizballah's arms, could be addressed by the right compromise president, Khoury argued.

SAUDIS APPROACH THE SYRIANS
ABOUT LEBANON'S PRESIDENCY?

¶11. (S) Asked by the Ambassador how one gets to a genuine compromise president, Khoury said that Saudi Arabia is already in quiet discussions with Syria, not on names but on the need to allow presidential elections to take place on time. In discussing names, Khoury said that he did not know how deeply involved Central Bank Governor Riad Salameh is with Syria. He noted with dismay that former Foreign Minister Jean Obeid is a strong contender. Maybe, Khoury mused, the Syria's Lebanese allies would be satisfied with just vetoing some names rather than insisting on a certain candidate. Khoury noted that it will be important for March 14 and its international supporters to begin discussing presidential options in earnest once the tribunal issue "is behind us."

COMMENT

¶12. (S) Murr and Khoury's reports are just two versions of a common rumor in Beirut, that Lahoud will use dubious legal powers to appoint a competing PM -- either now or in his last moments in office. In 1988-1990, such a scenario was disastrous for Lebanon, but Syria's allies in Lebanon have not proven to be overly concerned with preserving Lebanon's stability. While we have learned that the most outrageous claim may have some basis of truth in Lebanon, we nevertheless find Murr's report on Issam Fares to be surprising. During Syria's occupation of Lebanon, Fares had managed to be simultaneously both a pro-Syrian politician, providing financing to various Syrian figures and schemes, and a western businessman and philanthropist, hobnobbing with the rich and famous in Europe and the U.S.

¶13. (S) With the assassination of Rafiq Hariri and the international consensus against Syria's occupation of Lebanon, such a dual role was no longer possible. Fares, presumably unable to deal with the new contradictions in his life, left Lebanon. (Who was it who wrote that Monaco is a "sunny place for shady people"?) Including by going through the Greek Orthodox bishop's office here, we will seek ways to warn Fares that, even though the March 14 movement is not as strong now as it was in spring 2005 (especially given Michel

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Aoun's splintering influence), his international reputation will be harmed considerably if he resumes a prominent role as a pro-Syrian politician working against the legitimate Government of Lebanon. We note that Fares' powerful wife Hala is -- or at least once was -- a strident supporter of Michel Aoun. Hala may be nudging Issam to move in a direction that would damage the March 14 movement that stands in the way of an Aoun presidency.

¶14. (S) As for Aoun and Sleiman's reported refusals to accept Lahoud's pitch, good for them, if this is true: Aoun would be displaying more common sense than he usually projects. (We would love to be able to confirm that Aoun traveled secretly to Damascus.) But, mindful of the desire by the Lebanese to influence us as well as inform us, we note that Murr has been a steady advocate of Michel Sleiman's

supposed virtues. What Murr told us conveniently reinforces Murr's steady drumbeat to us that Sleiman, while occasionally weak in the knees, basically has the right instincts. We would not be surprised if, weeks or months later, Murr begins to talk to us about Sleiman in presidential terms, given Sleiman's close relationship with Murr.

FELTMAN